CHRISTMAS EVE
December 24, 2009
8:30 and 11 PM Services

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When you are the solo pastor of a small church, which is how many of us got started in this business, you are pretty much responsible for everything: preaching, leading worship, recruiting Sunday School teachers, balancing the budget, youth fellowship, seeing that the furnace works and the sidewalks are shoveled - and the Children's Christmas Pageant. If it's going to happen, it's all yours. I couldn't imagine Christmas without a pageant so after a year or two I launched one: wrote the script, recruited a retired teacher to help with costumes, stage sets and logistics and the all important matter of who gets to play Mary and Joseph and the Kings (everybody wants to be a king and I didn't want the responsibility of that decision). I was the director: directed the action and tried to keep some semblance of order at Saturday morning rehearsal, the pews alive with squirming children. It didn't quite rise to the *Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, Barbara Robinson's wonderful story featuring the Horrible Herdmans, one of whom, in the role of the angel, famously yelled - "Hey! Unto you a child is born." We practiced and were ready for the performance. The little church - with space for 100 worshippers was full of parents and families. The lights went out and the pageant commenced and it all went fairly well with a lot of help from the retired teacher who was sitting in the front pew acting as the prompter. I stood in the back with a two-year-old daughter in my arms - who was fascinated by the whole project. Mary and Joseph arrived and solemnly walked down the center aisle: the sheep and cattle stood reverently around the manger, where a doll, my 2 year old's "Thumbelina," I recall, who actually squirmed when you pulled the string in her back long before the American Girl store, was Jesus. In the corner of the chancel where the six-person choir sat on Sunday were 10-year-old shepherds. The angel appeared at the doorway: a flashlight illumed him - "Behold! Unto you is born this day, a Savior," he announced in his best voice. One of the shepherds said, loudly - "Let us go unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." And the 2-year-old in my arms, in a voice as clear as a bell, from the back of the church, announced, "All right! Let's go!"

And so we do this evening. So do millions of people throughout the world: "Go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place." All over the world preachers are standing in their pulpits this evening stammering, trying to find words appropriate enough, big enough for the mystery of the

incarnation of God, trying, if truth be told, not to get in the way of the good news.

I turned to a new resource for the preacher that everyone is using this year, and the first that I read was: “Christmas Eve is a challenging occasion for the preacher. It is not a time for lengthy sermons or wordy theological analyses from the pulpit. Rather it is a time for sharing the story, singing the carols and pondering the mystery. On this occasion less from the pulpit may be more.” Which is exactly what my closest advisor tells me every year when I start to explain and complain about how difficult it is to prepare for Christmas Eve. “We’re not coming to hear you, dear” she gently reminds me. “We want to hear the story, sing the carols, light our candles and go home.” She’s in great company, by the way. The late Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the greatest American theologian of the last century, used to say that, although his denominational tradition was German Reformed, on Christmas he and his wife always attended a high liturgical church, Episcopal or Catholic - where the liturgy and music carry the load and no one tries to explain what’s going on.

On that topic, nine-year-old Eleanor brought a friend to church a few weeks ago during Advent and they sat through worship. Afterwards, Eleanor asked her friend if she had seen her granddaddy. “No,” the little girl said, “I didn’t.” “He’s the one up front who talks a lot,” Eleanor said, “he gets a little boring.”

Carl Sandburg, Chicago’s great poet, in a Christmas poem, Star Silver, once wondered why the story never wears out. It happens to ordinary people: a pregnant teenager and her loyal fiancé who has decided to stay with her even though the baby she is carrying isn’t his.

A new thought for me this year was that Mary and Joseph are stressed, weary, inconvenienced travelers - (Michael Burnett, *Feasting on the Word*). They are ordinary people, like people we know, “trying to make their way in the world, squeezed by rising taxes and family demands, weary from a variety of struggles.” The inn is full - your flight has been cancelled and the hotels are all booked and you’re stuck overnight in the airport.

Luke includes a provocative counter story: shepherds are the first to hear about the birth. They’re so lowly and socially, politically inconsequential, they’re not traveling home to be counted in the census. Shepherds are still working, like unregistered immigrants, are resident aliens, not important enough even to be counted.

Thomas Merton once observed that “There were only a few shepherds at the first Bethlehem. The ox and ass understood more of the first Christmas than the high priests of Jerusalem. And it is the same today.”

We go to Bethlehem, you and I do, and we encounter a beautifully human story of a man and woman, and her giving birth to her baby, in a stable and laying him in a manger, and the star and skyful of light and singing, and the shepherds. And beneath the story, incarnation, the Word made flesh, the staggering assertion that in this child, God came into human history, in this newborn, in the man the baby grew up to become. God came in his life and teaching, his death and resurrection - Incarnation. To the oldest, most urgent question in human history, “Where is God?” the Christian answer is here-in him-this man-this life-this birth.

The philosophers say - this cannot be. The infinite cannot be finite: the universal can’t be particular. God, if there is a God, cannot be a Jewish baby born to an unwed mother in a remote corner of the Roman Empire.

It cannot be. It is not reasonable but come to Bethlehem: come and see. Come and see untold millions of lives made whole; come and see trembling knees and weak arms made strong; come and see lives renewed and healed; come and see the homeless sheltered, the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the prisoners freed. Come and see hospitals and schools and clinics and universities and art and music. Come and see the oppressed resisting their oppressors, the sick comforted, the dying given courage and hope.

Come and see his kingdom which keeps bursting into the life of this world: come and see how he is born again and again wherever love is.

Garrison Keillor, in the Wednesday *Tribune*, wrote about a Nebraska Angel in New York City. Keillor was in a deli on 10th Avenue where an elegant young woman was managing a herd of 8 teenage boys, ordering them breakfast from the lady behind the counter.

“The boys spoke Spanish which the young woman translated for the counter lady.” Keillor is standing, observing, waiting his turn - I imagine, a little impatiently. The boys - it dawns on him, are mildly challenged - congenitally or maybe because of brain damage. The young woman is their hired shepherd. A teacher’s aide - probably minimum wage - she is lovely, green-eyed, dark hair - her wool scarf says “Nebraska,” her English sounds Midwestern.

"The boys want muffins for breakfast except one boy who earnestly desires a sesame bagel, toasted, with cream cheese, but the deli is out of sesame, and this is a cruel disappointment to him. He really was counting on it. When you are 14 and so desperately vulnerable in the big city, you do pin your hopes on certain small pleasures.

"His face crumples and he is about to melt, and the elegant, green-eyed woman puts her head down next to his where he sits slumped on the deli stool. Her pale cheek against his cheek, she murmurs to him and a string of his enormous tears runs onto her face and she wipes it away and says something in Spanish which makes him laugh.

"A girl from the Prairie, using her Spanish to care for damaged boys in a callous world, where the poor and powerless get short shrift . . . She's my Christmas angel."

Christ is born whenever human love appears in the ordinary lives of ordinary people. The child of Bethlehem is born whenever unexpected grace and kindness and joy break in.

Christmas came and Christ was born for me late Tuesday afternoon, sitting in an aisle seat on the main floor of Symphony Center with family and grandchildren for the CSO "Welcome Yule" Concert. It's a wonderful occasion with the CSO and CSO Chorus and a Children's Choir and dancers, and some serious music and carols and light music to sing along with and at the end a mini drama with Santa late and maybe not coming at all. It's wonderful - but it was Tuesday afternoon - 48 hours before the Christmas Eve service and the sermon wasn't done yet, wasn't even cooking yet, if truth were told. So I was a little impatient, looking at my watch, thinking of all the other things I should be doing: notes to write, letters to dictate, telephone calls to make – not to mention the Christmas Eve sermon. Beside me sat 15-year-old Rachel, who has a few challenges of her own to cope with, and directly in front of me a very big man and a very big woman who I assume was his wife. Their hair was unwashed, their clothes ill fitting and dirty - and they were both so big I could barely see around them. Everyone got along fine during the program. Rachel and I and the big man and woman all sang lustily - Rudolph, Frosty, Winter Wonderland, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. And then the Santa drama began. Officer Mike, a delightful Chicago cop, assigned to track Santa, kept receiving texts - that Santa was circling, fog-delayed, lost, maybe not coming. Rachel got it: was very involved. The big man and woman too. The children on stage were visibly worried: what if Santa doesn't come? Whatever will we do? And then of course, Santa does come, right down the aisle beside our seats, big

and loud. “Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas to all!” The big man and his wife were cheering and clapping and Rachel came literally up out of her seat in pure joy and gratitude.

Rachel understood, maybe better than I - or any of us. Life is and can be full of unexpected grace and goodness and kindness. Human love can be the way hope appears. Human love is the way Christ is born and incarnation, the Word made flesh, happens.

Frederick Buechner said it beautifully:

> “Adeste Fidelis. Come and Behold him, born the king of angels. Speak to him or be silent before him. In whatever way seems right to you and at whatever time, come to him with your empty hands. The great promise is that to come to him who was born in Bethlehem is to find coming to birth within ourselves something stronger and braver, gladder and kinder and holier, than ever we knew before or than ever we could have known without him.”

So, yes…

> “Come to Bethlehem and see
> Him whose birth the angels sing:
> Come adore on bended knee
> Christ the Lord, the newborn king.”